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CRIMEA: Ten months in Russian "prison within a prison"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Prisoners of conscience Jehovah's Witnesses Sergei Filatov and Artyom Gerasimov are being denied letters sent to them. Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov is being denied letters sent in his own language of Crimean Tatar. He has been held for ten months in Kamenka Labour Camp's closed zone, in a cell holding 10 prisoners, but may be released in December. All were transferred illegally to jails in Russia.

One of the three Crimean prisoners of conscience jailed in Russian labour camps for exercising freedom of religion and belief in Crimea is expected to complete his prison term at the end of December, more than three years after his October 2017 arrest. Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov has spent the ten months since January 2020 in the closed zone ("strict detention conditions") of Kamenka Labour Camp in Russia's Kabardino-Balkariya Republic.

"If the labour camp has about 1,000 prisoners, the closed zone has about 10, and they are held all in one cell," relatives of Suleimanov told Forum 18. "It's like a prison within a prison." A labour camp official would not explain why Suleimanov is held in the closed zone (see below).

Visits from relatives and friends is made difficult by the Russian authorities having moved Suleimanov so far from his home, against the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules – A/C.3/70/L.3) (see below).

Letters from relatives have been handed on after being censored, but only if they are in Russian. Letters in the Crimean Tatar language are not given to Suleimanov, but he does have access to a copy of the Koran and can pray openly (see below).

One of the two cases Suleimanov's lawyer lodged to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg is about the illegal transfer to a Russian prison (see below).

Even once he completes his prison term, Suleimanov will have to live under restrictions for another year, while his bank accounts will remain blocked for many more years (see below).

"It is difficult for Renat's mother, who is in her eighties," one of Suleimanov's relatives told Forum 18. "She survived the deportation of all the Crimean Tatars [in 1944] and then to have this at the end of her life." She last met her son in a meeting in the Investigator's office in the Crimean capital Simferopol in summer 2018 (see below).

The two other Crimean prisoners of conscience sentenced to punish their exercise of freedom of religion and belief - Jehovah's Witnesses Sergei Filatov and Artyom Gerasimov - were transferred from Crimea to a prison in Russia in summer 2020. Both are now in Labour Camp No. 12 in Kamensk-Shakhtinsky in Russia's Rostov Region, which is over 560 kms (350 miles) from their homes, making visits from relatives and friends difficult. Neither are in the closed zone (see below).

As of 30 September, neither Gerasimov nor Filatov had been given any of the many letters Jehovah's Witnesses say were sent to him, against the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules – A/C.3/70/L.3). Prison authorities have refused to explain why they do this (see below).

Prisoner of conscience Gerasimov states that he is required to work six days a week in the sewing workshop, mainly making rubberised suits and masks. Prisoner of conscience Filatov works six days a week in the carpentry workshop, making carved pieces for backgammon sets, for which he receives about 100 Roubles (12 Norwegian Kroner, 1.1 Euros or 1.3 US Dollars) a month. This is about the price of a cup of coffee in a local cafe (see below).

The camp administration seized Gerasimov's Bible when he arrived. But he was later able to get a copy of the nineteenth-century Synodal translation of the Bible, which is widely used by Russian Orthodox, Protestants and others (see below).

The FSB security service continues to question associates of Gerasimov in Crimea, insisting that they "keep in touch". In one case,

the FSB spent half an hour questioning one acquaintance, asking if any friends and relatives of the acquaintance are Jehovah's Witnesses and asking about Gerasimov (see below).

Meanwhile, the criminal trial of another Crimean Jehovah's Witness Viktor Stashevsky on "extremism"-related charges began again (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2617) in the port city of Sevastopol on 19 October. And four more Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested in Sevastopol on 1 October after raids on nine homes, and ordered held in Investigation Prison in Simferopol until late November (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2617).

Three sentences, three illegal transfers

Crimean Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Rustemovich Suleimanov (born 30 August 1969) is serving his sentence in Russia's Kamenka Labour Camp. The Russian FSB security service arrested him in October 2017 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2432). In January 2019 a Simferopol court jailed him for four years on "extremism"-related charges (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2444) for meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss their faith.

In May 2019, the prison authorities transferred prisoner of conscience Suleimanov to Kamenka Labour Camp (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2496) (over 1,000 kms or 800 miles from his home) in Russia's Kabardino-Balkariya Region.

The Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War covers the rights of civilians in territories occupied by another state (http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf) (described as "protected persons"). Article 76 includes the provision: "Protected persons accused of offences shall be detained in the occupied country, and if convicted they shall serve their sentences therein."

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

Also, Rule 59 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules – A/C.3/70/L.3 (http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)) states: "Prisoners shall be allocated, to the extent possible, to prisons close to their homes or their places of social rehabilitation."

Prisoner of conscience Suleimanov lodged a second case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg on 18 November 2019 (Application No. 64404/19), complaining that his transfer from Ukraine (occupied Crimea) to a prison in Russia was illegal (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2550) under Article 3 Protocol 4 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and of inhumane treatment in prison (Article 3).

The second imprisonment for exercising freedom of religion and belief was of Jehovah's Witness Sergei Viktorovich Filatov (born 6 June 1972), a married father of four from Dzhankoi. On 5 March 2020, Dzhankoi District Court jailed him for six years with, post-prison, a five-year ban on activities (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2552), to punish him for meeting with family and friends to discuss religious themes. On 26 May, Crimea's Supreme Court rejected his appeal and upheld the sentence (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2577).

The third such jailing was of Jehovah's Witness Artyom Vyacheslavovich Gerasimov (born 13 January 1985) from Yalta. On 4 June, Crimea's Supreme Court changed his punishment from a fine of two years' average wages to a six-year jail term (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2577). Yalta City Court had imposed the fine on 5 March to punish him for meeting with others to discuss the Bible (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2552).

On 8 June prisoner of conscience Filatov was transferred from Crimea to Russia to serve his prison term (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2577), and in July prisoner of conscience Gerasimov was transferred to Russia to serve his prison term.

Both Filatov and Gerasimov are now in Labour Camp No. 12 in Kamensk-Shakhtinsky in Russia's Rostov Region. This is over 560 kms (350 miles) from Filatov and Gerasimov's homes, making visits from relatives and friends difficult.

The FSB security service continues to question associates of Gerasimov in Crimea, Jehovah's Witnesses note, insisting that they "keep in touch". In one case, they spent half an hour questioning one acquaintance, asking if any friends and relatives are Jehovah's Witnesses and asking about Gerasimov.

Prisoner of conscience Suleimanov: labour camp punishment cell to closed zone

In early July 2019, immediately after two weeks' quarantine, Kamenka Labour Camp authorities put prisoner of conscience Suleimanov into a punishment cell for an alleged conflict with another prisoner which his lawyer insists was fabricated (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2496).

Since Suleimanov in January 2020 completed six months in a punishment cell, he has been held in Kamenka Labour Camp's closed zone (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2550). "If the labour camp has about 1,000 prisoners, the closed zone has about 10, and they are held all in one cell," his relative told Forum 18 on 11 November. "It's like a prison within a prison."

The relative thought that Suleimanov was put in the closed zone "because of the [Criminal Code] Article [he was sentenced under]. All Crimean Tatar prisoners are held like that."

An official of Kamenka Labour Camp's Special Department refused to explain why prisoner of conscience Suleimanov was put in the closed zone, responding "because he was sentenced". Asked again, she replied: "Because he behaves like that." Asked how Suleimanov behaves, she responded: "He behaves well." She then refused to explain her statements and put the phone down.

While in the punishment cell, prisoner of conscience Suleimanov was not allowed either visits or letters. Visits from relatives and friends are made difficult by the Russian authorities having moved Suleimanov so far from his home. (Kamenka Labour Camp is over 1,000 km or 800 miles away.)

Suleimanov's mother is in her eighties and she last met her son in a meeting in the Investigator's office in Simferopol in the Crimean peninsula in summer 2018.

Letters from relatives have been handed on if they are in Russian, one of prisoner of conscience Suleimanov's relatives told Forum 18, "but they open them first – of course there is censorship". Suleimanov and his family would like to correspond in the Crimean Tatar language which they also write (and which the Mandela Rules support), the relative added.

The relative said that Suleimanov has access to a copy of the Koran and can pray openly. "There are a lot of Muslims in this part of Russia and many of the prisoners he is with are Muslims. They don't ban them from praying."

Suleimanov's address in Kamenka Labour Camp is:

361424 Kabardino-Balkariya

Chegemsky raion

Pos. Kamenka

Ul. D.A. Mizieva 1

FKU Ispravitelnaya koloniya No. 1 UFSIN Rossii po Kabardino-Balkarskoi Respubliki

Suleimanovu Renatu Rustemovichu

Prisoners of conscience Gerasimov and Filatov in same labour camp

On 27 July 2020, prisoner of conscience Gerasimov arrived at Investigation Prison No. 1 in Krasnodar in southern European Russia on the way to a labour camp. He was placed in a cell designed for 10 prisoners, but which had 15 when he and four other prisoners were placed there, Jehovah's Witnesses stated. Gerasimov and the other four extra prisoners could not sleep on the first night, after which only 10 prisoners remained in the cell.

In August, the prison authorities transferred prisoner of conscience Gerasimov to Labour Camp No. 12 in Kamensk-Shakhtinsky in Russia's Rostov Region.

On 16 August his lawyer was allowed to visit Gerasimov, and learned that the camp administration had handed over none of the many letters Jehovah's Witnesses say were sent to him. As of 30 September, letters had still not been handed to him. This is against the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules – A/C.3/70/L.3 (http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)).

Labour Camp No. 12 is over 560 kms (350 miles) from Filatov and Gerasimov's homes, making visits from relatives and friends difficult.

Prisoner of conscience Gerasimov states that he is required to work six days a week in the sewing workshop, mainly making rubberised suits and masks.

The camp administration seized Gerasimov's Bible when he arrived. But he was later able to get a copy of the nineteenth-century Synodal translation of the Bible, which is widely used by Russian Orthodox, Protestants and others.

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules – A/C.3/70/L.3 (http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)) require governments to respect the freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of prisoners. This includes access to religious texts and the freedom to pray individually and to meet for worship with others.

Prisoner of conscience Filatov was first sent to Investigation Prison No. 5 in Rostov-on-Don, where he suffered from bronchial disease, Jehovah's Witnesses stated, before being sent to Labour Camp No. 12 in Kamensk-Shakhtinsky. This is the same camp where Gerasimov is being held.

Filatov has worked six days a week in the carpentry workshop, making carved pieces for backgammon sets, for which he receives about 100 Roubles (12 Norwegian Kroner, 1.1 Euros or 1.3 US Dollars) a month. This is about the price of a cup of coffee in a local cafe.

Filatov's wife Natalya noted after a visit to her husband in prison that some prison guards are suffering from coronavirus. "Some of the prisoners are ill and lying down with a temperature, but they don't particularly want to give them medical attention," she told Ukrainian news site Graty for a 16 October article. "Sergei too has fallen ill. He is coughing, but the prisoners have to care for him themselves." She said her husband was suffering from symptoms of a cold, but has not been offered a coronavirus test.

The camp authorities in Kamensk-Shakhtinsky – like the prison authorities in Simferopol – were refusing as of 30 September to hand over the many letters that had arrived for Filatov, Jehovah's Witnesses complain. This is against the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules – A/C.3/70/L.3 (http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)). Labour camp staff ask him who he is and why so many letters arrive for him.

The lawyer for Gerasimov and Filatov asked the labour camp leadership about its refusal to hand over letters. "There was a promise to look into this," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "It remains unclear what the situation is now."

On 11 November, the duty officer at the Kamensk-Shakhtinsky camp said he was unable to put Forum 18 through to the head, Colonel Sergei Krikunov. He referred all enquiries to the camp's Special Department, but its telephone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 11 and 12 November.

Gerasimov and Filatov's address in Labour Camp No. 12 is:

347803 Rostov-on-Don Region

g. Kamensk-Shakhtinsky

Ul. Morskaya 94

FKU Ispravitelnaya koloniya No. 12 UFSIN Rossii po Rostovskoy oblasti

Gerasimov, Artyom Vyacheslavovich

Filatov, Sergei Viktorovich

Ombudsperson "can't check the validity of judicial decisions"

Asked why the three prisoners of conscience were transferred from the Russian-occupied territory of Crimea to prisons in Russia, an aide to Larisa Opanasyuk, the Russian government's human rights Ombudsperson for Crimea, told Forum 18 from the regional capital Simferopol on 11 November: "We're not occupied territory."

Asked why Suleimanov, Filatov and Gerasimov were jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief, Opanasyuk's aide – who would not give her name - took the details of their cases. "We must check this, we need to see if the information you have is accurate. But we can't check the validity of judicial decisions." She then put the phone down.

Prisoner of conscience Suleimanov to complete prison term soon?

Counting the time Muslim prisoner of conscience Suleimanov was held in pre-trial detention from October 2017 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2432), his four year jail term from January 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2444) is due to end in late December 2020, a relative told Forum 18. However, officials have not said exactly when that will be.

An official of the Special Department of Kamenka Labour Camp in Russia's Kabardino-Balkariya Republic, who would not give her name, refused to say when Suleimanov is due to complete his prison term. "We have no right to give you any information," she told Forum 18 on 11 November.

July 2018 amendments to Russian Criminal Code Article 72 stipulate that one day in pre-trial detention counts as one and half days in a general-regime labour camp ("correctional colony") after sentencing. The amendments had retroactive effect.

"But the Federal Penitentiary Service calculates the reduction, and it is not clear how they calculate it," his lawyer Roman Martynovskyy told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv on 10 November. "We're not sure how the time spent in transfer from the Investigation Prison to the labour camp is reckoned."

Suleimanov: Restrictions after release

After he completes his jail term, Suleimanov is expecting to return to his home on the outskirts of Simferopol, where he lives with his wife and three teenage daughters.

Even once he completes his jail term, Suleimanov will live under restrictions for a further year. "He will not be able to change his place of residence without permission, will not be able to leave his home town or village, and will have to report to the authorities twice a month," his lawyer Martynovskyy told Forum 18.

Suleimanov's bank accounts will continue to be blocked. He was added in April 2019 to the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215), whose accounts banks are obliged to freeze, apart from small transactions.

"It is difficult for Renat's mother, who is in her eighties," Suleimanov's relative told Forum 18. "She survived the deportation of all the Crimean Tatars [in 1944] and then to have this at the end of her life." (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Crimea
(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=86>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Crimea religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051)

Forum 18's reports and analyses on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia within its internationally-recognised territory (<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion and belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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